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Zelfbeeld en zelfideaal

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

1965

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Werff, J. J. V. D. (1965). *Zelfbeeld en zelfideaal: tegenstrijdigheden in de beoordeling van de eigen persoon*. s.n.

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Summary

ORIENTATION

1. SELF, KNOWING ONESELF, BEING ONESELF

Everyday experience, sayings and fiction are used to show the difficulties which arise if one wants to describe oneself unambiguously. Special attention has been paid to the phenomenon that one can state quite different and even opposite things about oneself with an equal voice.

Two current 'solutions' are mentioned: on the one side the thesis that the self, the essential reality of the human personality, is an illusion; on the other side the multiplicity of the self, the existence 'in' any person of more than one self. The diversity and the contradictions within the individual self-image will be the central theme of this study.

2. THE SELF CONCEPT

The first step was to examine whether diversity and contradiction also exist in self descriptions if these are obtained by some current methods in psychology. The W.A.Y.-technique ('Who are you?') was used, and spontaneous self descriptions in essay form.

The phenomenon was clearly found indeed, and a tentative description of the nature of this divergency was given.

3. THE IDEAL SELF

The first orientation also includes the ideal-self concept. From spontaneous descriptions and interviews it was found that the ideal concepts of the subjects also contain many discrepancies. Subjects are often doubtful about their own ideals; on second thoughts they show hesitation, see drawbacks and come to the idea that they have still other, often incompatible ideals.

In spontaneous ideal-self descriptions remarkably little use is made of trait names; subjects mainly describe activities, situations or abstract ideas.

INVESTIGATION

4. AN INDEX FOR DIVERGENCY

An instrument is introduced measuring the divergency in the self or ideal concept. Using bipolar-trait scales the subjects are allowed to put two check marks on each scale at the desired distance from the two poles, to indicate the presence of both opposite traits to a certain degree. As a divergency-score the average distance between the check marks is taken.

Validity and reliability problems for this instrument are discussed. Special attention is given to the question if each bipolar scale is really composed of two opposites; it was tested by rating each trait on the more 'fundamental' bipolar scales of Osgood, in the translation of Kouwer.

Finally the logical incompatibility of the opposites was tested; without this checking of two opposite traits cannot be taken as an indication of real divergency in the self or ideal concept.

5. THE DIVERGENCY IN THE SELF CONCEPT

An explorative analysis of the divergency in the self concept was made on twenty bipolar scales, checked by 65 subjects in the way just mentioned. Considering the content of the scales with high divergency scores, three possible sources of divergency were supposed:

a valuation effect: the tendency to great divergency on scales with two favourable adjectives and to small divergency if both are unfavourable; to be considered as a parallel of the Social-Desirability variable.

a perspective effect: taking or not clearly separating two possible view-points in describing oneself: idealizing and more realistic.

a situation effect: imagining oneself in various circumstances and situations may lead to higher divergency-scores.

6. TESTING THE VALUATION EFFECT

The valuation effect is tested experimentally. Pairs of traits are selected, which in one way are opposite, but have the same sign in the evaluation factor; consequently scales are used with two favourable and scales with two unfavourable poles. The average divergency scores of both types of scales appear to be significantly different in the expected direction. The question is faced to what extent this difference may be due to the other two supposed effects. Related studies in literature are discussed.

7. TESTING THE PERSPECTIVE EFFECT

The perspective effect is tested experimentally. In the control group the subjects described themselves with an open mind: both points of view, the idealizing and the realistic, could be taken. Two comparison groups clearly took only one view-point.

One of these groups was unambiguously idealizing: in fact the instruction was to give a description of the ideal-self concept. The other group was suggested to be unambiguously realistic: this simply was done by asking the subjects to describe their ideal self before instructing them to give their self concept. The latter instruction was unspecified and identical with all other instructions to describe the self concept; the speculation was that a preceding occupation with the ideal self would suggest a contrasting realistic view-point.

Both comparisons clearly suggest the existence of a perspective effect. Again the question was faced whether the results may be partly ascribed to the other effects; also some literature was surveyed.

8. TESTING THE SITUATION EFFECT

The situation effect is tested experimentally by asking both unspecified self-descriptions and descriptions in which the subjects think of themselves as they are in certain specified situations. Three types of situations were used:

those in which inner feelings and emotions are expressed,
those in which one functions in a greater whole, adapting oneself to the system,
those in which one has to behave in a completely prescribed way,
indicated as intentional, systematical and mechanical situations respectively.

In view of the two other effects, only adjectives were used which appeared to obtain mid-scores on the evaluation factor.

Specified and unspecified self-descriptions differ significantly in divergency, within the specified ones intentional situations having the highest, mechanical ones the lowest scores.

The differences for each separate scale are inspected, and the possible influence of the other effects. Some literature is referred to.

9. THE DIVERGENCY IN THE IDEAL SELF

Parallel to chapter 5 an explorative analysis was made of the divergency in the ideal-self concept. The highest divergency-scores were obtained by those scales which on the one side show such traits indicating mobility, change, variation, and on the other side traits which suggest stability and rest.

The phenomenon is called 'stability-contrast effect', supposing that the divergency in the ideal-self concept partly results from striving after the combination of both poles of the contrast.

10. TESTING THE STABILITY-CONTRAST EFFECT (BIPOLAR SCALES)

The stability-contrast effect is tested experimentally by means of ideal-self descriptions on bipolar scales which partly did, partly did not contain the polarity 'dynamic-stable'. Only adjectives were used which appeared to obtain mid-scores on the evaluation factor. The two types of scales show significantly different divergency-scores. In addition it is clearly shown in earlier obtained self descriptions that the phenomenon also, via the idealization tendency, influences the descriptions of the real self.

11. TESTING THE STABILITY-CONTRAST EFFECT (DESCRIPTIONS OF IDEALS)

As trait names are seldom used in spontaneous ideal-descriptions (chapter 3), the stability-contrast effect is also tested in three other ways.

It was found first that by subjects who are asked to choose two out of a number of ideal descriptions, the combination of a 'dynamic' and a 'stable' ideal is chosen more than by chance.

The second indication was found in the subjects' formulations of their drawbacks if 'one-sided' ideals are presented: in the 'dynamic' and in the 'stable' ideal they just miss the complementary element. After the formulation of drawbacks the score of the ideals, rated on the activity factor (Osgood), remains unchanged, the score on the evaluation factor is very much lower than before: so the very notion of missing one of the two elements reduces the perceived value of the originally highly-esteemed ideals.

In the last experiment the subjects' descriptions of their own ideal were used. The most 'one-sided' ideals ('dynamic' or 'stable') and the most 'balanced' were selected by asking the subjects to what extent both elements were represented in the ideals. The subjects also checked a list of statements by which the ambivalence with respect to their own ideal was measured. Subjects with a 'one-sided' ideal proved to be more ambivalent than those who had given more 'balanced' ideals.

PERSONALITY THEORY

12. THE IMAGE OF PERSONS AND OF ONESELF

After the descriptions of the experiments an effort is made to make the results intelligible starting from the idea of man living in the world together with others.

The fundamental necessity to co-exist and to enter into relations with others is discussed; forming images of others and of oneself is necessary to meet this requirement; without these intercourse is unthinkable. Man lends meaning to companionship by creating 'valuable purposes' on which it can be focused.

The images of others and of oneself may imply typical features of social roles and functions as well as highly individual characteristics.

13. THE NATURE OF THE SELF IMAGE

In existential view the human existence is described as looked at by the Other. Man is threatened by two fundamental dangers: being 'nothing' under this look and conversely, as soon as we are 'something' – by means of status, position, power and such-like –: to be imprisoned in the existence of that 'something', like an object, which is nothing else than what it is. Many personality theories can be understood as attempts to escape from these two dangers.

Also the stability-contrast effect may be conceived in this way: in the ideal concept one is both seeking after that 'something' (stability) and avoiding the fixation to that something (mobility, uncommittedness). From the values and purposes on which the intercourse is focused and from their variety the valuation and the situation effect are intelligible.

14. THE NATURE OF THE IDEAL-SELF IMAGE

Essentially self concept and ideal concept are identical because the self that must be 'shown to the Other' has to be an optimum self; both have surplus elements however. The self concept also includes the 'failing self'; for the subject the optimum and the failing self are equally 'real': from this 'double' truth the perspective effect is intelligible, because the subject in his self description may be switching between these two points of view.

The surplus element of the ideal self is the escape from the looking Other: by means of the ideal self I engage with myself. The ideal means both the constant, stable inner core of myself, which I am already in a fundamental sense; as much it means the striving for this reality: so the stability-contrast effect in the descriptions of the ideal self is understandable.

In conclusion some reflections are given about the question who the 'looking Other' is, and then the initial question 'Who am I?' is taken up again.

PRACTICAL POSSIBILITIES

15. SINGLE AND DOUBLE CHECKING

Given the divergency in the self concept subjects who are forced to rate each bipolar scale by a single check mark will be apt to assign mid-scores. For this reason the *diagnostic interpretation* of self descriptions on single-marked scales is very difficult, as the psychologist does not know whether the scores reflect a compromise or an unambiguous self-perception. The tendency to use midscores also has *statistical* implications. Among other things it is supposed that the

divergency in the self concept will weaken the negative correlations between opposite traits and consequently will influence the factorial clustering of the traits. Indirectly – especially via the perspective effect – previous descriptions, repetition and order can also be of influence; among other things this is important for the reliability of the *self-ideal discrepancy*-index. Finally the difficulties and possibilities of the method of ‘double-checking’ are discussed, with a view to diagnostic interpretation and statistical operations.

16. DIVERGENCY AS A PERSONALITY VARIABLE

The divergency in self and ideal self concept is discussed from the view-point of differential psychology. Possible relations with other variables, especially mental health are suggested, starting from Maslows concept of ‘self-actualizing people’.

Special attention is given to a new type of self-ideal discrepancy, being the difference between the self-concept divergency and the ideal divergency; it indicates the subjects appraisal of the divergency in his self image: it may be taken negatively as a source of conflict and disharmony, on the other hand it can be positively understood as an indication of the variety of human possibilities.

Finally partial divergency-scores (divergency on selected scales or clusters) are mentioned and some technical problems of the divergency-score are discussed.